
ME101 Lecture 4: Geopolitical Competition in the Middle East | The US and its Allies — Boots on the Ground or Off Platforms?

Speaker: Mr Tommy Steiner

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US involvement in the Middle East has been shaped by a combination of interest — mainly in the form of oil energy — and balance of power calculations since at least the 1950s. While the US won the Cold War in the Middle East in the early 1970s, it paid heavily as a result of being bogged down in strategic engagements in the region. The series of incidences, including the Iran hostage crisis of 1979 and the Gulf war of the 1990s, culminated in the 11 September 2001 attacks, when the global war on terror became top priority for US involvement in the Middle East.

The region's underdevelopment became understood as a threat to American national security and the superpower sought to address it. This has taken a huge toll on America, and not only in terms of cost but its poor track record has also critically derailed its strategic ambitions for the region. With the Obama administration, Mr Steiner said we witnessed the US turn to Asia and a rising China. The US has also grown largely independent of Middle Eastern oil, and we have been observing a diminishing US strategic footprint in the region. With the recent Trump administration decision to cut US ground troops in Iraq to 3000, observers are now musing if the world power will remain engaged in the Middle East, or if it is moving towards disengagement.

In the fourth lecture of the ME101 series, Mr Tommy Steiner, an adjunct lecturer of international relations and security studies at IDC Herzliya, an associate fellow at the Henry Jackson society, and a policy consultant for Signal, an Israeli policy organisation focusing on China-Israel relations, shared his penetrating insights on the issue and made well substantiated predictions on the future of US engagement with the Middle East.

US Strategic Engagement in the Middle East

Mr Steiner began his talk by highlighting that the US was a late comer to the Middle East. It was initially reluctant to engage seriously with the region, even at the beginning of the Cold War, leaving Britain to maintain its interests there. This changed when the US realised that it could not rely on Britain, or other allies such as France, to maintain its interest in the region. With the nationalisation of the Suez Canal by General Gamel Abdel Nasser, against the warnings of the US and despite British, French and Israeli efforts to reclaim it, the US understood that if it needed to manage its interest in the Middle East, it would have to do it itself. But apart from its interest in oil energy, Mr Steiner mentioned a few other aspects that eventually led to America's deep engagement with the Middle East. This included its balance of power calculations vis-à-vis other world powers, as well as the level of threat perception the region poses to its national security.

Significance of Oil in US–Middle East Engagement

While stressing that it is not the sole issue, Mr Steiner reiterated that the question of energy remains a very dominant one. This was not always the case, because until the mid 1940s, the United States was the world's largest producer of oil. This eventually changed and in 1956, the Pentagon determined that oil supply from the Middle East was of vital interest. It thereafter became one of the main drivers of US engagement with the Middle East.

Despite being less dependent on Middle Eastern oil recently, the US is still affected by the region's oil developments. This is due to the fact that two thirds of the world's oil reserves are located in the Middle East, and that they are the most easily accessible, meaning their production cost is very low and therefore easy to supply. Middle Eastern oil thus still, to some extent, sets the price of oil in the market and can easily influence global prices of oil and in the US.

Israel–US Relationship

The special relationship between the US and Israel is another main feature of the former's approach to the Middle East. Mr Steiner underscores that the relationship evolved only in the late 1960s, particularly in the 1970s; it did not exist before. The relationship evolved to become a strategic one during that time when Israel proved that it was a strategic asset and could be made useful for the US. This reflects, as Mr Steiner stressed at this juncture, the essential point that the US approach to the Middle East is and has always been based on maintaining its interests and power.

In many ways, Israel facilitated in American involvement and balance of power in the Middle East during the Cold War. The Middle East was not the top priority of the US at that time, but the Soviets were making inroads into the region and creating relations with Egypt, Syria and others. This encroachment into the Middle East by the Soviets culminated in the 1967 Arab–Israeli war, which was a significant turning point of US involvement in the Middle East.

The Arab countries' shocking defeat by Israel demonstrated to them that the Russian support was weaker than American-backing. It also resulted in a unique relationship between the United States and Egypt, and also eventually in the Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty in 1979. The 1973 Yom Kippur War, in which the Soviet-backed Arab countries imposed an embargo on the United States, which backed Israel, and several Western countries also led the US to push the Arab–Israel conflict to the top of its agenda.

Israel also proved to be a reliable and strategic ally to the US when Jordan decided to expel the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) out of Jordan in the 1970s. In what has been called the Black September, the PLO started an uprising in Jordan with Syrian participation. The Jordanians brokered with the US and Israel in its attempts to resolve the conflict, and the US, having limited resources to fly troops in and mobilise troops, turned to Israel to provide Jordan with assistance. Thus, throughout the early second half of the 20th century, and with Israel proving time and again that it could be a strategic and reliable ally, the US was successful in protecting its interests and balance of power in the Middle East.

Terrorism

Mr Steiner then moved to the threat of terrorism as another central feature of US strategic entrapment in the Middle East. Following the Cold War, out of which the US emerged victorious, the US stayed in the Middle East to keep the Soviets out and to try to solve the Middle Eastern conflict. The situation immediately following the Cold War revealed that the conflict-ridden region was still very volatile. Beginning with the 1982 conflict in Lebanon and reaching a peak in the Gulf conflict and bombings of US facilities in Saudi Arabia and Africa of the early 1990s, the US began to witness anti-American terrorist plots.

According to Mr Steiner, however, the September 11 attacks on New York City in 2001 was a remarkable watershed in US strategic conduct towards to Middle East. During the Cold War, America's approach towards the Soviets, its primary enemy, was one of containment. Following the September 11

attacks, however, it abandoned this approach and became more proactive at pre-empting hostile plots against the US. Underdevelopment in the Middle East thus became viewed as a threat to American national security as it provided fertile political, economic and social grounds for terrorism to brew. US strategic entrapment in the region thus reached its peak.

Failure of US Policy in the Middle East

This ambitious undertaking, Mr Steiner noted, did not work well for numerous reasons. First of all, it was a huge, perhaps impossible, undertaking to try and fix the Middle East in one big bold strike. The Americans were not only trying to deal with the likes of Saddam Hussein, but they were also involved in democratising regimes and influencing elections to push the region's politics in their favour. This led, for example, to the issue with the 2005 Egyptian elections, which saw the Muslim Brotherhood forming the largest opposition bloc, and the subsequent attempts to delay 2006 council elections and disqualify most of the Brotherhood candidates. This combination of boots on the ground and political pressure, said Mr Steiner, simply did not work and incurred great costs both in terms of life and expenditure.

When President Barack Obama entered the White House, there was a slight reversing of this approach in favour of one that employed more strikes and attempts to pull back on-the-ground troops from the Middle East. This approach to the Middle East during the Obama presidency was shaped by the economic crisis and the need to devote more resources and attention at home. At the same time, the US had to contend with what was then still only a rising and increasingly assertive China. When it came to the Middle East, there was a strong desire to do away with the unending war in the region that was costing US significantly.

But this approach, as Mr Steiner highlighted, led to other issues. The Obama administration's attempts to deal with the Muslim Brotherhood, in hopes that it could be the answer to US hopes to disengage from the region, created a lot of tension between America and its allies in the Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Israel and Jordan. The administration also oversaw the messy withdrawal of US troops from Iraq in 2011 — which, as Mr Steiner argued, offered fertile ground for the rise of Islamic State (IS) — only to send some back in 2014 to handle the growing terrorist insurgency.

The Obama administration's approach in the Middle East had a negative effect on America's credentials in the region. As an example of US action that led to such an effect, Mr Steiner mentioned, is the failure of the Obama administration to keep its commitment of employing military action against the Syrian regime should it use chemical warfare against its civilians, as it did in summer 2013.

The other effort to limit the US costs in the region noted was to seek a diplomatic approach towards Iran. For Mr Steiner, this deal was a compromise that, while it certainly had its merits, ultimately kicked the can down the road rather than solving the nuclear issue then and there. He argued that the price of the deal was that it encouraged Iran to engage more extensively in other regional activities to create strategic strongholds in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen.

Finally, towards the end of Mr Obama's presidency, Mr Steiner said we witnessed a big Russian comeback to the region, to which the Middle East did not object. All this, he concluded, led US allies in the region to the understanding that they could rely on the US only to a certain degree and that they might find themselves on their own.

Trump's Unpredictability

Moving on to US engagement in the Middle East during the Trump era, Mr Steiner highlighted at the outset that it did not differ very much, strategically speaking, from the Obama administration's approach. Mr Donald Trump was different in how he chose to deal with Iran, but his approach has not resolved Russian involvement in the region. Overall, in many ways, like the previous administration, Mr Trump wished to limit America's strategic debt in the Middle East.

However, what really stands out when it comes to the Trump presidency is his unpredictability. On one hand, it has kept American adversaries on their toes. The Iranians learnt this the hard way with the unexpected targeted killing of Qassim Suleimani back in January 2020. The Russians, too, learnt this in the summer and autumn of 2018 when the American administration, before deciding to pull out, rushed the strongholds and prisons in Syria.

But on the other hand, its signature policy in the Middle East, perhaps, has been its “maximum pressure” on Iran, and that led Mr Steiner to ask: “To what end?” One could argue that maximum pressure has been highly effective. But it is missing the point if the application of pressure has not yielded any policy result because to a large extent, as Mr Steiner contended, it is possible that the Iranians believe that the US is really after regime change, and if that is the case, there is no reason for the Iranians to compromise.

Some commentators have pointed to the recent treaty agreements between the UAE and Israel as evidence of Trump’s success in the region. But for Mr Steiner, this ignores the fact that the deal, and others like it, is not only about American pressure. Relationships between nations in the Middle East have been evolving in this direction for several years because the American allies have come to understand that they need to work together in view of an increasingly unreliable US.

In the same vein, Mr Steiner referred to the recent Israel–Iraq efforts that, though it did not really work, reflects a growing awareness among Middle Eastern players that they have to take on regional threat with their own hands.

Will Biden Make a Difference?

Mr Steiner finally argued that a Biden presidency would make a difference to some extent and raised two points. The first was that though the turn to Asia and the rise of China remain predominant issues, and though Mr Joe Biden also wishes to limit US exposure to the Middle East, a Biden presidency could result in a substantial change in the US approach towards its traditional allies in the Gulf. Mr Steiner suggested that this is a potential problem. Second, the American approach to the Middle East under Mr Biden is projected to be much more predictable, which Mr Steiner stressed is a significant point, and reminiscent of traditionalist US foreign policy in the Middle East. But in all, Mr Steiner concluded that the US will not leave the Middle East, though it may continue downscaling its presence.

Highlights from the Question and Answer Session

Q: Do you think the Middle East will become another strategic battleground between China and the US the way the Indo–Pacific region in the South China Sea has become?

A: Mr Steiner suggested that China would be more cautious about its engagement in the Middle East because it has seen the price the US paid for its management of the region, and it simply does not want to commit to that kind of cost and engagement. Having said that, Mr Steiner acknowledged that China has strong maritime energy interests in the Persian Gulf, in the Middle Eastern waterways as a connection to Europe. It is likely for this reason, among others, that China has a modest presence in Djibouti. To conclude his response, Mr Steiner did not rule out a greater Chinese engagement in the Middle East, but insofar that China does not become more assertive, he does not see it happening.

Q: Could you expand on the UAE–Israel treaty? What does this deal, and others like it, say about the future of US engagement with the Middle East?

A: Mr Steiner mentioned the UAE–Israeli story is remarkable. What was most remarkable, for him, was that the Emiratis showed no hesitation in going public with this normalisation of relations. Such an occurrence would be unthinkable a year or two ago. Currently, however, the Emiratis are eager to do so and they are pushing forward to finalise the details of the agreement vis-à-vis Israel. Mr Steiner reiterated his earlier point that this is happening largely independently of American pressure. Both sides have their

own reasons for doing so, and it goes beyond commercial considerations. For the Emiratis, there is the belief that doing so will strengthen their strategic posture in the Middle East. Essentially, for Mr Steiner, this signals a future of reducing reliance on a US that has been seeking to reduce its engagements with the Middle East.

Q: Will there be another attempt at a treaty like the JCPOA if Biden wins? And if Trump wins, what then?

A: Starting with the latter scenario, assuming that Mr Trump gets re-elected, Mr Steiner asserted that nobody really knows what will happen precisely because of his streak of unpredictability. One point that Mr Steiner noted, however, is that Mr Trump has made clear his desire to reach a deal with Iran, which reflects his visible fascination with handling deals. He also suggested that we may probably see Mr Trump attempting to do the same with Iran, though that would not be something well accepted in the region as it may lead to the further proliferation of lethal weapons. But he reiterated that this is all up in the air due to Mr Trump's unpredictability.

A Biden win, on the hand, means the US engagement in the Middle East will become more predictable. He has also made it clear that he intends to return to the JCPOA and to the negotiating table with Iran. This and other factors together could send a message that the United State is going to be less around, and other powers, such as Iran and Russia might use this as an opportunity to make advancements in the region.